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KEEPING A SENSE OF HUMOR

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New technical editors face many problems that are not discussed in college textbooks. While working within the management structure, they must analyze the needs of their organization, be sensitive to individual personalities, innovate, and gain acceptance for new and more efficient ways of producing written communications. This paper describes some simple and practical ideas from the experiences of a new technical editor for working successfully with authors and management to improve attitudes toward written presentations. These concepts can help the technical editor to increase the quality and accelerate the production of written communications from draft to printed copy while maintaining a civil relationship with authors and keeping a sense of humor.

Why I thought I could be a technical editor I will never know. In my spare time I muse upon it. Perhaps it was because of the many years I spent under the tutelage of rather stern grammarians. Or maybe it was the lean college years when I supplemented my pitiful income by grading freshman English papers. I was, after all, a moderately successful writer, and after teaching the sciences and working with engineers, I did understand their lingo. Most important, I thought I had a good sense of humor.

So I occupied my desk in my new office with a false sense of confidence. First, the routine correspondence was brought to me for review, and that was not so bad; and if all the reports were to be like the first one I edited, I would have them out of the way in no time. Its author was obviously interested in good writing, and I could understand his subject. The report was short, succinct, and lightly illustrated. When I filed the printed copy of this first report, I assured myself that indeed I could be a good editor.

However, I began to notice some disturbing behavior among my fellow group members. They had not exactly flocked to my door to welcome me to the group—but I knew they were busy with their projects. I also noticed that when I walked into an office, its occupants suddenly got very quiet and very busy. As I peered over the shoulders of an engineer pouring his thoughts onto paper, my unsolicited suggestions were coolly received.

Back at my desk, I thought about the history of this group. It had been recently transferred from one division to another. Change is unsettling, and some of the engineers, including the group leader, had chosen to find jobs elsewhere. The division to which we were transferred had final reviewing authority on all written communication and also had very high writing standards. What had passed for adequate writing before was now unacceptable. Most papers were returned for corrections or rewrite. That was why I had been hired—to improve the writing of the group. Could it be that they were not as happy to have me as I had expected? With the dawning of this incredible possibility began the education of a new technical editor.

Now that I knew there was a problem, insecurity took the place of confidence. I began to ask myself a lot of questions about why I was here and why I was staying. I reasoned that someone must have seen the need for this function in my group or the job would not exist. Without the support of my supervisors, the confidence of the authors, and the

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cooperation of the office staff, I knew I could never successfully improve the quality of my group's writing. The division management had set the standards that our writing had to meet, and I wanted to know exactly what was expected. So I spent an hour with the Division Office person who would review all written communication. He outlined the review procedure, and my specific duties came into focus. Perfection in writing had never been one of my objectives, but I quickly adopted it.

In searching for a standard of perfection, I turned to our laboratory's frequently revised style manual that gives guidance on accepted policies and procedures, report makeup, and preferred usage. I learned that this was compiled by the senior editors who review all formal reports after the divisions approve them and before they are printed. Needing allies, I made their acquaintance. These editors became an invaluable source of information and encouragement. They even offered me a short apprenticeship with them so I could learn their procedures. My questions answered, I returned to my office with style manual, the official English handbook, the recommended dictionary, and a knowledge of my division's writing policies—all the tools I thought I would need to begin the great reformation.

I was no less ardent than your average reformer. Surely these engineers would see the necessity of complying with new writing standards. The group was growing in size, the reports were stacking up on my desk, and compliance would speed up the process from draft to printed copy. I read each paper several times, diligently seeking for awkward construction, misplaced modifiers, dangling infinitives. My favorites were deadwood and passive voice, and now the authors could be free of this verbiage and awkwardness. At last our language would allow them to take credit for what they had done. Obviously, I was doing the author a favor by correcting all his mistakes. Then I called him to my office to review his paper. He was subtly shamed for his errors and encouraged to brush his paper up a bit before it went on to higher levels of review.

Much to my surprise, the reformation was not going so well. If the authors were uncomfortable with the use of personal pronouns, they could not see why circumlocutions like "it was found that" and "it is thought that" were not good usage, especially in the scientific world. They found my rewriting an insult and my reviews with them a bit like a visit with a school marm. A surprising number of authors seemed to feel that detailed editing and polishing of even their own papers was a waste of their time. Most had many defenses for their style of writing—it had been acceptable in the past, they had been taught to write that way, or all the articles in technical journals are written in that style. Some had been taught technical writing in recent college years and were interested in learning to write well. But most were apathetic, apprehensive, and defeated, and some were downright hostile.

The Division Office continued to return written communications for corrections of errors I had missed. The constant retyping was introducing new errors and making the office staff irritable. The increased volume of paperwork had resulted in misplaced drafts and illustrations. Every author's paper was the most important one in the hopper, so scheduling became a headache. Morale was not improving, the grumbling reached management, and I felt like a failure. What had happened to my sense of humor?

A few weeks away from work gave me the chance to evaluate the situation and my place in it. The problems could be grouped into those pertaining to myself, the authors, and the office staff. I knew that if these people were satisfied, then written communications would pass more smoothly through the many levels of review and approval. Already I had the concern and backing of management that are so necessary to enforce the new standards. So first, I reconsidered my attitudes toward myself as an editor. I did not like the gritchy person I had become. I had made a lot of mistakes, but I had learned from them. So I made some resolutions about my work.

- I would not take myself too seriously. I knew I would make mistakes, and fellow workers would be quick to point them out. So I would learn to fake a laugh through my snarl, and maybe they would learn to laugh, too.
- I would not always get my way, even though I was right.
- I would set reasonable schedules. Even on the busiest of days, short breaks rest tired minds and reduce errors.
- I would find a pleasant, quiet place to work where interruptions are minimized, even if I had to leave my office.
- I would continue to refresh my knowledge of grammar through reading, review and listening in on conversations in the next room. I could always learn something new, and a positive feeling about my editing ability would make conflicts easier to face.
- I would try to be consistent in my editing. I would refrain from making arbitrary decisions when grammar is correct but style is not to my liking. To do this, I would compile a checklist of things to look for so that every paper received equal treatment.

Dealing with the authors was an entirely different problem. Where modifying my own behavior might be easy, modifying the behavior

of authors would require considerable psychology.

My experiences at writing had shown me that an author exposes his inner self when he commits thoughts to paper; the pride of authorship is ever present. Consequently, he is especially sensitive to criticism. If he is a scientist or engineer, he probably enjoyed the research and dreads the reporting. I had to be more sensitive to these feelings if I was to gain his confidence.

My interactions with authors had not been positive. But I had inferred from their attitudes toward me some things that I could do to help them.

- o I would review, not rewrite. I would mark errors with proofreader's marks and make notes in the margin that refer to the style manual or grammar handbook. Then the authors could correct their own errors. Each one knows what he means and would prefer to write it in his own style. Besides, he learns from correcting, and his writing skill improves, reducing my work.
- o I would schedule a review of his paper at a place where he is comfortable and a time when he is not harrassed by telephone calls, colleagues, or tight schedules.
- o I would word my comments to him in a positive way. Every paper has some merits, and we all like a pat on the back. Ridicule, sarcasm, and negative comments breed resentment and apprehension about the next writing assignment.
- o I would encourage every author to take a course in technical writing. Association with fellow sufferers from other industries would help him to see the commonality of the problem. Though I expected that he would return praising the course but denying its applicability to him, I knew that eventually he would be proud of his improved writing.
- o I would attempt to change old error patterns by humorous instruction. Being aware of particularly troublesome construction or commonly repeated errors, I would distribute memorandums containing humorous examples of these problems. We would call these memorandums Billet Doux's (love letters) and distribute them every few months.
- o With the concurrence and backing of management, I would develop the idea of a review team for papers or portions of papers that are controversial or that are written by several authors. Such papers were taking too much time to review, and authors could not agree. Meeting with the author(s) and the managers who have final review authority, we would read the paper out loud sentence by sentence and let them suggest and agree on correct wording. Though this would be very time-consuming, it seemed the only way to end controversy and cycling.

The problems of the author overlapped those of the office staff when the typing, scheduling, and movement of his paper were involved. The problem of frequent retyping and new errors were easily solved with the purchase of a word processing system with a large memory. Time in typing, correcting, and re-editing was reduced, and because the new system was fun to operate, dispositions improved.

However, misplaced papers were still an embarrassment to the secretaries and a frustration to the authors. So we designed an office log as pictured in Fig. 1. Each piece of paperwork coming into the office for typ-

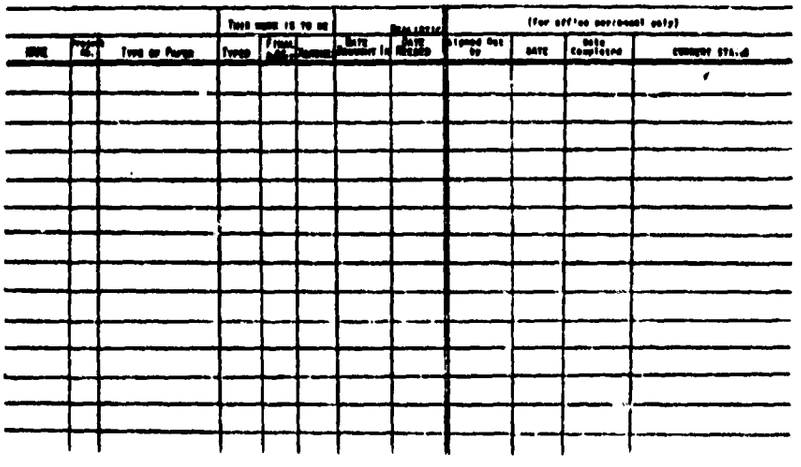

Fig. 1. The office log records every piece of paperwork and is used by the secretaries for planning the office workload.

Type of work _____ Project No. _____

Title _____

Number _____ LA report? _____ 1-Column ____ 2-Column ____

Author _____ Addressee _____

Date in Process _____

Pages _____

ID # _____ Archive # _____

STATUS	TYPED		PROOFREAD		EDITED/REVIEWED		
	Name	Date Finished	Name	Date Finished	Name	Date Finished	Corrections Needed

Special Instructions:

Sent out _____ To _____

Fig. 2. The cover sheet is used to record the movement of a paper and to analyze the efficiency of office procedures.

ing is entered on this log by the senior secretary. When a secretary takes a typing assignment, she initials that entry; she dates the entry when an assignment is completed. The log gives the senior secretary data for planning the office workload, a record of every document that is typed, and an answer for the author when he asks who is doing his work.

However, the log solved only a part of the problem. Every typed document goes through varying levels of typing, proofreading, editing, and approval. Often the secretary had insufficient information about the document to process it properly. We needed a means of collecting information about that document and recording its movement through these channels so that it did not miss a necessary step.

A cover sheet like that in Fig. 2 has filled that need. With input from the author, the senior secretary fills in the sheet and attaches it to every memorandum, letter, or report. The sheet will stay with the document as it moves through every step from draft to to final copy. As each person completes his part of the chain, he initials and dates the sheet in the appropriate box. This history of a paper not only keeps track of its movement, but also provides data that are graphed at regular intervals to study the efficiency of our office procedures. The cover sheet also gives haggard writers a chance to take out their frustrations by counting and marking the number of errors to be corrected.

With these two forms, the office staff and I were regaining our credibility with the authors. But one refinement remained to be made in our procedures. Formal reports such as those printed and distributed to government agencies and industry were a unique problem. Because of delays, last year's annual report was often printed this year. Our customers were rightfully peevish, and funding and jobs could be jeopardized. A report along with the vellum originals for its illustrations could

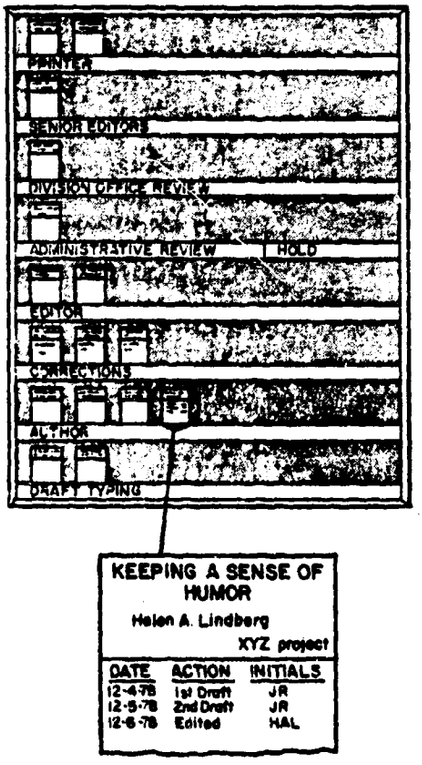

Fig. 3. The status board makes visible the location and status of every formal report.

mysteriously disappear, cover sheet and all. The author was very sure he had given it to the secretary, who was very sure she had given it to me, and I had never seen it. Though someone usually sheepishly appeared with it, with so many reports in process at one time, we needed a means of tracking each one.

The "status board" that appeared outside my office not only solved this problem but also restored a sense of humor to the entire process. This board shown in Fig. 3 is not fancy. We made ours out of a 4- by 5-ft bulletin board with bright poster board strips stapled to it for card holders. Labels on each strip indicate the various steps from draft typing to printing, including a slot titled "HOLD" for unavoidable delays like illness or travel. When a new paper is brought in, a 4- by 6-in. card is typed giving title, author, and project number. Everything that happens to the paper is logged on the card by date, action, and initials. Unlike the cover sheet that stays with the document, these cards are placed in the slot representing the current status or location of that report. Within a given slot, cards are placed left to right in the order that the paper will be processed in that step.

Now the entire report load of the office is visible to everyone in the group. No one can falsely blame another for delays. Grumbling is declining, work schedules can be planned at a glance, and authors no longer have to question stammering secretaries and the embarrassed editor as to the whereabouts of their papers.

Sometimes the status board takes on the character of a game board. The person responsible for each slot likes to keep his free of cards by moving cards to another slot. While good natured jostling goes on, work at any given step is completed faster. The status board has been nicknamed "the ladder of success". Group members often adopt a favorite and watch its progress. The author of a particularly tedious paper takes his share of ribbing as his card moves down more often than up. But when it finally reaches the top and copies arrive from the printer, the card is retired to a file and a party celebrates the completion.

I think visibility is the reason for the success of the status board. But whatever the reason, good humor and a group spirit have returned to our organization. By meeting the challenge of a crisis, we have all learned that good written communications are produced by a cooperative effort. We are still working on ways to improve our procedures. But one thing is sure. Though I had the managerial support and all the right dictionaries, handbooks, and policies, I had forgotten the technical editing tool most essential to a successful career, most difficult to obtain, and most easily lost--a sense of humor.